

REMEMBER THE PUEBLO

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The two-month Navy Court of Inquiry on the seizure of the *Pueblo* has proved one thing—that the military hierarchy changes very little. The volumes of testimony read much like the hearings on Pearl Harbor, the Tonkin Gulf, the 1968 Tet offensive. If anything, they show that the *Pueblo* mistakes could be repeated tomorrow.

Despite the length of the proceedings, the Navy tribunal managed to avoid any serious look into the military operations surrounding the *Pueblo*. Therefore Congress is not satisfied, and the House Armed Services Special Investigating subcommittee has already opened its own investigation. Chairman Otis Pike (D., N.Y.) says his panel will interrogate Pentagon figures whom the Navy avoided.

The House unit should concern itself with divided authority, intelligence breakdowns and command confusion—all matters that the Navy ignored. First of all, it should dig into the divided command problems of the new Navy. The *Pueblo* was a divided ship. Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher sailed the vessel, but an intelligence officer, Lieut. Stephen Harris, had complete charge of its spy center.

In many ways, the intelligence lieutenant was the most important man on the ship. Bucher got into the spy nerve center of his own ship only when he could prove a definite need to know. When he ordered destruction of security material during the attack, he was amazed to find that cleaning up the classified attic would take half a day. Harris' spy radio was almost the only contact the *Pueblo* had back to its base in Japan. Perhaps it is no accident that she became the first U.S. naval ship to be pirated in 150 years. In the days when a captain was complete master of his ship, the command confusion in the midst of the *Pueblo* attack would have been unthinkable.

In the new Navy, ambiguity of command prevails all the way back to Washington. Commander Bucher's boss, Rear Adm. Frank Johnson, had a similarly divided house at Japan Naval Forces headquarters. Johnson ran the ships, but Naval Intelligence, acting for the National Security Agency (NSA), ran the spy business. Johnson got only a verbal report on the *Pueblo* spy situation before the ship sailed. His sole fleet consisted of the *Pueblo* and a sister spy ship, the *Banner*. He lacked even a PT boat for help in case of trouble.

Back in Washington, NSA ran the spy operations, while the Navy Department tried to be helpful. Task Force 7623 was supposed to coordinate everyone who had a hand in the *Pueblo*, but it didn't. The 58 pages of messages logged in from all the commands during the crisis reveal a disjointed indecision that wasted the hours when the ship might have been saved. Nor is the *Pueblo* unique. An earlier intelligence vessel, the *Liberty*, operated under a similar split authority between NSA and the Navy. During the 1967 Israeli-Arab Six Day War, the *Liberty*, not being part of the Sixth Fleet, was allowed to wander too close to the war front. When the Pentagon belatedly tried to warn the ship to clear out, messages were mis sent to NSA headquarters and then away from it.

get the warnings. Part of the failure to detect the 1968 Tet attack was traced to intelligence static between U.S. security agencies and the South Vietnamese.

NSA is also the intelligence power behind the throne of the Air Force. The Mission Impossible agency has built five \$100 million ground-based spying antenna stations around the world. The Air Force runs them, even relays intelligence data through them from its satellites and spy planes, but NSA pulls the strings.

Congress will also ask why it was hours before the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense were alerted in the *Pueblo* crisis. The ship sent its first alert at 10:50 A.M. Korean time, January 23. It flashed the North Korean threat to open fire an hour later. That was 10 P.M. Washington time, but the Joint Chiefs were not notified until midnight; Defense Secretary McNamara was not informed until 12:23 A.M. By then, the *Pueblo* had been boarded and was on its way to captivity.

All *Pueblo* wires were addressed to the Joint Chiefs. Its warnings and calls for help should have been relayed to the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon within seconds. Commander Bucher said his "critical" priority wires went directly to the White House also—and this was so, since the Executive mansion is tied to the Pentagon war room. No one has explained why the frantic *Pueblo* SOS took two hours to reach the top commands.

If the Pentagon brass was not around when the *Pueblo* was attacked, neither was Rear Admiral Johnson, the man immediately responsible for rescuing the ship. At that moment, he was delivering a welcoming address to the annual Navy Typhoon conference in Tokyo. He was called to the phone and told in veiled terms, "The *Pueblo* is in trouble. She may be gone." Johnson had trouble rounding up transportation back to his command. He finally commandeered an Army helicopter, got home at 3:10 P.M. local time, when the *Pueblo* was already in Communist hands. His staff had requested help from the Air Force, but not the Seventh Fleet. His juniors told him that the Navy had nothing to send.

But the Seventh Fleet did have help less than an hour's flying time from the *Pueblo*. The carrier *Enterprise* was steaming 600 miles away, bound for Vietnam. Its pilots were primed on Vietnamese targets. The Navy said it would have taken hours to brief them on the uncertain *Pueblo* crisis. Four hours after getting the *Pueblo*'s "Mayday," the Seventh Fleet finally decided to send two destroyers to its aid. By then, the *Pueblo* was being escorted into Wonsan. The destroyers would have had to blast their way into the port to effect a rescue, and Washington had no heart for risking a second Asian war. It ordered the destroyers back.

The command confusion was so bad that no one bothered to radio any communiqué to the *Pueblo*. Nowhere in the 58 pages of communications is there a single official message to the beleaguered ship. In all likelihood, there was nothing to send. Bucher told how it felt to be left to fend for his ship with only two frozen-shut machine guns: he beat the bulkhead with his fists after leaving the ship's message-less radio room.

The only word the *Pueblo* got from Japan was an erroneous rumor passed on by the base radio operator:

"Understand the Air Force has some F-105s already winging on the way to you." Bucher kept listening for these fighters even as his Communist captors were tying up his crew. The *Pueblo* radioed back equally false rumors that were spreading through the ship. Many of them ended up in the official Pentagon briefing to Congress immediately after the capture.

In the heat of battle, speculation and wild reports too easily slip into command communiqués. The *Pueblo* rumor mill recalls the 1964 Tonkin Gulf spy ship ambush, when the Pentagon believed reports of a sea full of enemy torpedoes and shells. All but two of the torpedo soundings turned out later to be sonar detection of the ships' own rudders.

Congressman Pike's committee ought also to determine if the military gadgeteers are not putting too much trust in electronics. The Pentagon has built the most elaborate intelligence and communication network the world has ever seen, but the electronic wizardry faltered in this, as in previous military crises. The *Pueblo*, a converted Army cargo tub straight out of Mr. Roberts, was chosen to carry the best spy gear that we owned. In fact, there was so much of it that the ship was top-heavy; a Navy report said she would capsize in a 40-knot beam wind.

This ultra-sensitive gear had an unfortunate tendency to become cranky. Both the *Pueblo* and the *Banner* reported extreme delays—often as long as twenty-four hours—in trying to talk with their base over the complicated spy radio. The *Pueblo* radio, built by the National Security Agency, had to be synchronized within a hairbreadth with its intelligence receiver in Japan. This pleased the security people, since the complex fine tuning made it almost impossible for the enemy to listen in. Unfortunately, it turned out to be nearly as hard for the *Pueblo*'s own base to receive.

Commander Bucher said he tried unsuccessfully for fourteen hours to put his first alert through. The *Banner* often took half a day to get its radio in code tuning with Japan. Once, when an engine failed, the *Banner* tried for twenty-four hours to establish contact and finally gave up. The Navy uses similar code radios on other ships.

The *Pueblo* inquiry asked, but did not reveal, whether, because of friction with the NSA, the ship sailed without normal self-destruction systems for classified equipment. Navy intelligence sources have had a sustained running fight with NSA on the issue that self-destruct devices are often too dangerous for pitching, rolling ships. These sources say that during storms ships often disconnect self-destruct circuits to prevent them from going off accidentally.

The basic question of the *Pueblo* is whether the spy trip was necessary. No one knows how much of the information gathered by the intelligence ships was really vital, reliable or worth the great risk. Commander Bucher himself testified that his haul of spy secrets had been meager. The *Pueblo* snooped on every North Korean shore battery and radar in range for three days, but learned nothing new, according to her skipper. One wonders if the *Pueblo* flouted North Korean threats just for idle snooping.

Certainly the government appears to have changed its mind quickly on the value of the special spy ships. Shortly after the *Pueblo* grab, the National Security Council pulled back the gunshoe fleet. The *Banner* made some token forays, mostly surrounded by the Seventh Fleet.

The USS *Palm Beach* sits in Norfolk, Va. The *Liberty* was put in moth balls. However, the Navy has not completely abandoned coastline spying. It now eavesdrops with destroyers under the safety of their 5-inch guns. The two Navy destroyers that sailed along the Russian Black Sea coast last December carried listening gear.

Intelligence is essential to any government, but the risks must be weighed. Everyone in the Pentagon, from the Navy to the Joint Chiefs, called the *Pueblo* mission "lowest possible risk." Yet they sent one of the most sensitive U.S. spy ships into troubled waters, in the face of growing North Korean threats to "severely punish" the next reconnaissance mission near its shores.

Any military high command that makes such judgments must surely be scrutinized. After the *Pueblo* seizure, Rear Admiral Johnson said, "Ship spying is a whole new ball game now." The spy rules may have changed. The *Pueblo* question is: Has the military changed?



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